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SUBJECT: NINGXIA MUSLIMS, PART 1: GOVERNMENT CONTROLS LIMIT
ISLAM'S INFLUENCE AND ROLE IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

REF: A. 2007 BEIJING 7406
[1](#)B. 2007 BEIJING 7329

Classified By: Deputy Political Section Chief Ben Moeling. Reasons 1.4
(b/d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Ningxia is not fertile ground for the further spread of Islam, despite the substantial ethnic Muslim concentrations that live there. Government controls on religious education, the freedom of worship among Muslim CCP members and other aspects of religious life, as well as echoes of the destructiveness of the Cultural Revolution era, contribute to an environment which limits the influence of Islam in Northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, according to scholars, imams and other contacts across the province. In this less than encouraging environment, imams are unwilling to engage in beneficial social work for fear of treading in what one contact calls "the Party's territory." Contacts worry that Islam is losing influence among Hui youth and working adults because of such restrictions combined with challenges brought on by the forces of modernization and globalization. The Party places high importance on social stability and ethnic solidarity and thus opposes any expansion beyond Ningxia's five main Muslim sects: Qadim, Ikhwan, and the Chinese Sufi "menhuan" of Khufiyya, Jahriyya and Qadiriyya. End Summary.

Scholars, Imams Describe Government Controls

[1](#)2. (C) PolOff visited northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and Shaanxi Province March 30-April 4. The home of two million ethnic Hui, the largest concentration of Hui in China, Ningxia is one of China's poorest regions, ranking 21st in per capita income out of China's 31 administrative regions in 2006 according to Chinese Government statistics. Ningxia scholars, imams and officials described a wide range of government controls on Islam which contribute to a generally discouraging religious environment in Ningxia. According to a Yinchuan City-based imam surnamed Luo (strictly protect) and two Hui Muslim scholars of Ningxia University, Zhou Chuanbin (strictly protect) and Ren Jun (strictly protect), Ningxia currently has over 4,000 mosques and about 10,000 "government-certified" imams. (NOTE: This figure is slightly higher than the 3,700 mosques reported to PolOff during official meetings (ref A).) Imam Luo said that in order to attain official certification an imam must take a government-administered exam, the content of which is "about 70 percent religion, 30 percent politics." Included in the politics-related sections are questions on state and Party religious policy. Imams are forbidden to "promulgate

religion" outside of a mosque or Muslims' homes. Forbidden activity includes giving lectures on Islam at local universities. Professor Zhou complained that he translated a book by U.S. expert on Chinese Muslims Dru Gladney, but that the translation has thus far been denied publication in Ningxia because "religious topics are a little sensitive."

¶3. (C) Young children in the predominantly Hui Muslim, southern Ningxia counties of Tongxin and Guyuan are widely known to take religious classes at mosques during summer and winter vacations, even though government policy forbids children from receiving religious education before completing the compulsory nine years of public education (ref B). According to Professor Zhou, how strictly this rule is enforced depends on the officials in a given locality. Some mosques may justify the practice by pointing out that the children are not studying religion year-round, nor is this limited study conflicting with their public education, he added. Contacts say roughly a quarter of Yinchuan's population is Hui Muslim, while half of Guyuan and upwards of 85 percent in Tongxin is. Luo regrets the inability to instill knowledge of Islam in Ningxia's Hui youth at a younger age, an obstacle which he fears strongly decreases the odds these Hui will practice religion as adults.

¶4. (C) In a separate meeting with PolOff and Ningxia Foreign Affairs Office officials, another Yinchuan-based imam, Yang Faming, echoed Luo's sentiment about decreasing enthusiasm for religious practice among young people. He noted that the summer and winter vacation religious classes lack a standard religious curriculum, and said the Government-affiliated Islamic Association will not likely address this issue. Yang said that recruiting students to become imams represents his greatest challenge to sustaining the religious needs of his

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community. As a result, attendance at prayer services tends to be dominated by older Muslims. At downtown Yinchuan's showcase Nanguan Great Mosque, the mosque's official guide told PolOff that "only old people" come to pray five times a day at the mosque, because the bosses of younger Muslims would never let them take so much time off work for fear of disrupting productivity. She estimates that at most, fifty men worship at Nanguan Great Mosque each day.

¶5. (C) PolOff toured a school for young "manla," or imams in training, that Luo successfully founded at his mosque after a difficult, "two-to-three-year" approval process involving the local education, public security, united work front, religious affairs and ethnic affairs departments. The school currently has seventy students from six provinces and autonomous regions, who, in accordance with local government requirements, have completed their nine-year compulsory education. After three years at Luo's school, these young manlas will pursue another six to seven years of religious education at other Islamic schools in Northwest China. Luo said few if any of his students will be able to study abroad in a Muslim country, because the Government "generally restricts such travel."

¶6. (C) While some complain of restrictions on travel abroad, it seems that Hui with government connections are able to overcome such obstacles. The former chief of Ningxia's Tongxin County Religious Affairs Bureau who now works for the government-affiliated Ningxia Islamic Association, Yang Xue (strictly protect), also described the difficulty in obtaining local government permission to study abroad. Yang himself, however, was able to send his son to high school in Kuwait. PolOff met two other officials from Tongxin who had successfully sent sons to Pakistan. Hong Yang (strictly protect), a Sufi imam and member of the Ningxia People's Congress Standing Committee, also has been able to send a son to university in Egypt.

¶7. (C) In addition, CCP members have difficulty participating in the Hajj. The Nanguan Great Mosque features two large

rooms filled with photographs of Party leaders, including China People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Chairman Jia Qinglin, touring the mosque. Asked if Ma Qizhi, an ethnic Hui and recently retired former Chairman of Ningxia who is featured in many of the pictures, has completed the Hajj, the mosque guide said, "Maybe, as long as he has withdrawn his membership from the Party." CCP officials, she observed, are generally not allowed to join in the pilgrimage to Mecca. The guide told PolOff that except for some "low-level" officials on major holidays, government officials in Yinchuan almost never come to worship.

18. (C) Luo and both Professors Zhou and Ren asserted that in the past year there has been a de facto moratorium on the building of new mosques, because all mosque applications for government approval have been denied since last year. Professor Zhou suggested that Party control and ideology are behind the move. Although China's constitution promotes the protection of religious freedom in words, Zhou said, the CCP still espouses "atheism," and "does not want to see the further development of religion in Ningxia." Luo described the policy against new mosques as a means of protecting "stability and ethnic solidarity." He told PolOff that the proliferation of mosques reflects and enables a proliferation of sects, which then increases the likelihood of divisions within the Muslim community and of intra-ethnic conflict. The Chinese Government recognizes five sects: the traditional Chinese Qadim (or the "old teachings"), the more recent Ikhwan (the "new teachings"), and the three Sufi schools or "menhuan" of Khufiyya, Jahriyya and Qadiriyya (called "Hufeiyi," "Zhehelinye" and "Gedilinye" in Mandarin). (NOTE: "Menhuan" is a term used for Chinese Sufi sects.) The Ningxia authorities have also accepted the existence of a sixth, quickly developing, but still relatively small Salafiyya (Wahhabist) population (septel).

In Social Work, Imams Do Not Challenge the Party

19. (C) The Ningxia Government's lack of enthusiasm for religion has led to a diminished social role for imams. Imams in Yinchuan and Guyuan admitted that the mosque does very little social work in the community. (NOTE: Ma Mingbao (strictly protect) an Ikhwan imam of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province's Guangbeiqi Street Mosque who has studied in Syria, lamented the diminishing social role for imams in Xi'an as well.) Steve Hyatt (protect) an AmCit PhD candidate who has lived in Yinchuan for three years researching Hui identity

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and history, told PolOff that this restrained social role for imams is true across Ningxia. Hyatt, who enjoys connections with the local Party elite (the younger brother of the current Chairman of Ningxia is Hyatt's classmate and Hyatt's three young children go to the Ningxia Party School pre-school), believes there is an understanding among the Ningxia Muslim community that social development work is "the Party's territory," and that social activism among imams could trigger an unfavorable reaction from the Central Government. (NOTE: The chairman of an autonomous region is the head of the region's government, just as a governor is the head of a provincial government.) Hyatt pointed out that foreign development workers he knows in Ningxia have encountered similar difficulties, with local officials often trying to redirect foreign development funds to projects that enhance the local Party's stature or that of their own development projects.

110. (C) NOTE: Professor Yang Wenjiong (strictly protect), a well-known expert from Lanzhou, Gansu Province, on China's Hui people and religion regrets the distrust of Muslim social work in other provinces as an unfortunate obstacle. However, he told PolOff in February that there have recently been signs of positive change in Gansu. For example, Dongxiang ethnicity imams in Gansu's Dongxiang Autonomous County have had so much success in using faith-based methods to clean up

a rampant local drug problem (marijuana and heroin also pose big problems in Ningxia) that Dongxiang officials were recently invited to Beijing to give a talk on their approach to the problem to the Ministry of Public Security. End Note.

¶11. (C) Hong Yang, a Sufi (Khufiyya menhuan) imam and leader of the Hongmen Sufi order which has followers in Ningxia and Xinjiang, is an example of a religious figure who has successfully managed government relations to an extent that allows him to play a very active role in social development. Hong and his Hongmen order of over 2,000 imams and 1,500 mosques have initiated several social programs in Hong's native Tongxin County, central Ningxia, which include building an inexpensive, private "Muslim" kindergarten, a boarding school for rural girls and offering university scholarships for up to two dozen young imams each year (septel). Hong has accepted government positions on the Standing Committee of the Ningxia People's Congress and as Vice Chairman of the Wuzhong City People's Political Consultative Conference, but downplays these official responsibilities as "having to attend some boring meetings in Yinchuan." Professor Zhou derides imams "sought out for cooperation" by the government, and notes that cooperation often works to an imam's disadvantage among his followers. However, even Zhou conceded that Hong has maintained a devout following among the people of Tongxin.

Strong Network of Hui Imams Across China's Northwest

¶12. (C) Imams in Yinchuan and Guyuan described the strength of inter-province connections between Hui imams in northwest China. Imam Luo in Yinchuan as well as Hui Imam Ma Ziming at Guyuan's Dongfang Mosque, both Ikhwan imams, frequently travel to mosques and Islamic schools around Ningxia and even into Gansu and Inner Mongolia. Luo praised this coordination as a means for bettering one's own teachings through exposure to other imams' "teaching methods, theological expertise or community relations." The network also facilitates recruiting and assigning imams to mosques in different counties and provinces. Luo's first imam posting was to a mosque in a "very poor, isolated" area of Inner Mongolia. He said other imams from surrounding areas offered him a crucial support network, regularly visiting not only to give advice to the novice imam, but also to bring food and other household items that his mosque members could not afford. Luo maintains contact with religious schools in Gansu's Linxia region, which are famous among the Chinese Muslim community for being centers of Hui Islamic education, particularly for Ikhwan followers. Such schools contribute to the fostering and maintenance of these connections.

Restrictions "Not That Bad" Compared to the Past

¶13. (C) Imams in Yinchuan, Tongxin and Guyuan expressed moderate satisfaction with the government management of religion, despite a number of restrictions and controls. In assessing the current state of religious affairs work as "not too bad," Luo, Hong and Ma Ziming all compared the present situation to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in which mosques all across Ningxia were burned and destroyed and

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religious practices forbidden. Stories of that destructive era, already more than three decades past, seemed to be fresh in people's memory in several conversations between Ningxia Muslims and PolOff.
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